



The Light of the World Decoded



St. Paul's Cathedral Education Department

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Introduction

One of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt (1827-1910) became famous for his religious paintings. He travelled to the Holy Land to familiarise himself with the landscape and light of that part of the world, which added realism to his work. He paid great attention to details and his most popular works contain many symbols.

First produced by Hunt in 1854, *The Light of the World*, is a much-loved painting, and he went on to paint the same subject three times. Hunt said of the painting, “I painted the picture with what I thought, unworthy though I was, to be by Divine command, and not simply as a good subject.” The first version, much smaller than that which hangs in St. Paul’s, is now to be found in Keble College, Oxford. Another version is in Manchester Art Gallery.

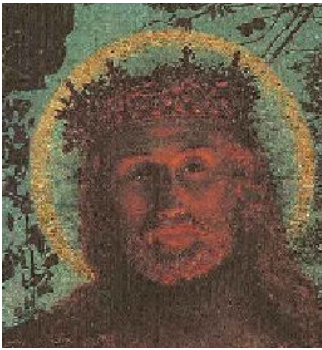
The version which is found in St. Paul’s, was painted in Hunt’s old age. His eyesight was failing and he was helped by pupil, Edward Hughe. There are small differences between the different versions, most notably, in the Cathedral’s version, Jesus’ halo is not painted as the full moon as it appears in the other two.

Charles Booth, a wealthy ship owner and philanthropist, was a great devotee of Hunt’s work. He organised for the large version of the work to be taken around the world where it was seen by around two million people. Whilst in Australia, for example, reports state that it was viewed by a hundred people every minute.

Booth donated the painting to the Cathedral in 1907 and it has hung in there for most of past hundred years.

It is considered so precious that during World War II it was “evacuated”, and today sits within a fire-proof box, whose doors can be closed if flames threaten.

The Figure of Jesus



A Victorian Jesus

Jesus is painted very much in the Victorian style. He is depicted as white, with long blond hair, the way he appears in hundreds of stained glass windows around the country. No one knows what Jesus actually looked like. Although many of the earliest Christians were Jews, and therefore forbidden from using images of God in their places of worship, the Church adopted the Graeco-Roman practice where gods were commonly depicted in human form. Early pictures of Jesus can be seen in the Catacombs in Rome, where the Christians hid during times of persecution.

Hunt painted Jesus in a manner in keeping with his own tradition and culture. Artists around the world tend to depict Jesus as being the same race as themselves, and it is not uncommon to find pictures showing Jesus as black in Africa, Asian in India, or Oriental in China. It would be a mistake to think that Christians today really think of Jesus as being of one particular race; it is more a question of what is familiar to them.

Halo

The halo around Jesus' head shows that he is a holy, 'set apart' person. Halos are found in the art of many religions, and usually surround the head of the most important saints or teachers.

Crown of Thorns

Hunt's travels in the Holy Land led him to paint a particular kind of thorn. The spikes were around 10cm long and were used by Roman soldiers to light fires. They would have been roughly twisted together and pushed firmly onto Jesus' head. The gospels mention that this was done as part of Jesus' humiliation before his execution. He was also stripped naked and beaten repeatedly with a stick. Such treatment was usual for criminals about to be crucified. However, the soldiers also mocked Jesus' claim to kingship. Thinking he had intended to become a secular ruler, overthrowing the Roman Emperor, they dressed him in a robe and placed the crown of thorns on his head to make fun of him.

Jesus' Expression

Hunt painted Jesus' expression as one of great patience. He does not show anger or fatigue, but waits quietly for the door to be opened. The eyes seem to look directly at you wherever you stand, and many people would say they are eyes full of love.



Jesus' Hands

Jesus' hands show the marks of the nails which were hammered through them when he was hung on the cross. Modern medical research has found that this method would not have been able to support the weight of the body and that the



nails would probably have been hammered through the wrists.

After Jesus' resurrection, Jesus showed his disciple Thomas, the holes in his hands and feet to prove that it really was him back from the dead. (John 20)

In the painting, Jesus' right hand knocks at a door, whilst his left holds a lantern.

Jesus' Feet

Holman Hunt painted Jesus' feet turned sideways away from the door. The meaning of this is that he has been knocking at the door for a very long time and now is preparing to go. The implication is that it is almost too late to open the door and admit Jesus into our lives.



The Priestly Robe and clasp.

Jesus is wearing a long white robe, like that worn by the High Priest in Jewish tradition. He is also wearing a clasp on his cloak that resembles the breastplate worn by the High Priest. In the time before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, once a year, the High Priest performed a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Christians consider Jesus' death a sacrifice for the sins of *all* people, once and for all, and sometimes refer to Jesus as the Great High Priest. (Hebrews 7)



The Surroundings



The Dark Wood

In the painting, Jesus is standing in a wood at the end of the day. Anyone who has been in a wood in the dark will know what a sinister place it can be. The dark wood symbolises our life, which can be mysterious and terrifying. The fact that Jesus, the Light of the World, is there with us is intended to be a comforting thought.

However, the implication in the painting is that Jesus has been standing there, knocking on the door, throughout the day. Night is almost here and time is running out to open the door.



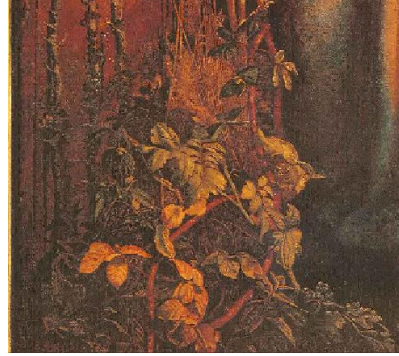
The Door

The door represents the door of our lives. Jesus knocks on the door, and waits patiently for us to open it up.

Crucial to the painting is that the door has no handle. The only way for it to be opened is from the inside. A person who hears Jesus' message needs to accept it and open their life to admit him. The words from Revelation 3:20 written beneath the picture read, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sup with him and he with me" inspired Hunt's painting.

Weeds around the door

The dense growth of plants around the door symbolise sin. They stop the door from being opened, just as sins often distract people from following Christ. Many of the weeds are dead and dying, indicating that life without Jesus is no life at all.



Lantern

All the light in the painting comes from the lantern held in Jesus' left hand. This serves to explain the meaning of the painting's title. Jesus declared, "I am the Light of the World" (John 8:14). "I am" is a phrase that recalls Jesus' divinity (when Moses asked God whom he should say had sent him to free the slaves, He replies, "Tell them 'I am' has sent you"). (Exodus 3:14)



As the Light of the World, Jesus gives life, just as the Sun gives life to the world. He also leads his followers through the dark and difficult times of our lives, providing guidance and hope.

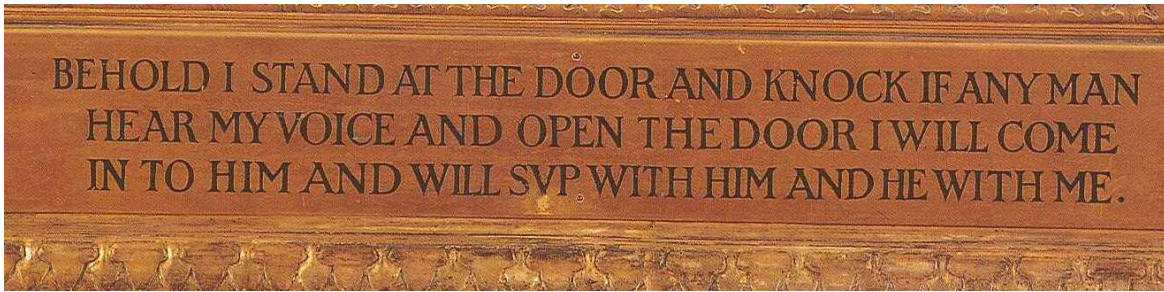
A careful study of the lantern will reveal that there are little holes in the top. These are six pointed stars and crescent moons, the symbols for Judaism and Islam. This symbolises that Christians believe that Jesus is the Light for all people, and knocks at everyone's door. Muslims revere Jesus (Isa) as an important prophet, although do not consider him to be divine.



Fruit

The fruit, fallen on the ground, is rotten and has been discarded. This symbolises how some people treat Jesus' invitation. Like the weeds around the door, it is a symbol of desolation and decay, which accompanies a life lived without the Light of the World.

The Inscription



Taken from Revelation 3:20, the last book of the Bible, the inscription is the key to understanding the whole painting.

The original words were written in Greek and some of their meaning is lost in a direct translation into English. A more literal reading would be, *"Here I am! I have been standing (for a long time) at the door and I am constantly knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."*

'Eat' in this context refers the main meal of the day, taken in the evening. There is no doubt that sharing a meal with someone is an intimate and trusting activity.

The New Testament frequently tells of Jesus eating with people and many parables and teachings contain references to feasts and celebrations. According to John's Gospel, even after his Resurrection, Jesus ate with his disciples (John 21).

Jesus also used meals in his parables. The Kingdom of Heaven is often referred to as a feast to which people are invited. In the Parable of Great Banquet (Luke 14), invitations are sent out, but people make excuses and do not turn up. The servants are then sent out to bring in all those who were classed as outcasts from society.

Today, Christians still celebrate the Eucharist, in remembrance of the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples. Sharing bread and wine, they remember Jesus' body and blood sacrificed on the cross.